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ABSTRACT

This update provides an overview of school-choice models and issues as they were defined in 1992. It describes how intra- and inter-district programs work and the factors that contribute to the effectiveness of a choice plan. Tensions in the choice debate center around the issues of diversity versus commonality, competition versus efficiency, and access versus equity. Legislative initiatives passed or being considered by the following western states--Arizona, California, Nevada, and Utah--are described. Many researchers have pointed out that choice cannot be viewed as the answer to the complex problem of school reform. Because choice is not a low-cost reform effort, it must be linked to other improvement strategies and offer families genuine choice. (LMI)

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As the nationwide debate continues on educational reforms, the idea of creating market driven educational systems is gaining political visibility. Many state decision makers view public school choice as the policy tool that can strengthen schools as organizations and restructure the teaching/learning process. Since most states already have mandated such reforms as increased high school graduation requirements and tougher teacher certification regulations, choice has become part of a movement to find ways beyond mandates to encourage innovative school-site practices.

Broadly defined, choice gives parents, students, and teachers more educational options and allows them to choose among those options. Ideally, supporters argue, choice empowers individuals to participate in school decision-making and influence what is taught, how it is taught, and in what forms.

Choice currently heads many political agendas. The National Governors' Association has endorsed it since 1986. As of Spring, 1991, 10 states had enacted formal open enrollment legislation; seven (Arkansas, Idaho, Iowa, Minnesota, Nebraska, Ohio, and Utah) had complete state programs; and three (Colorado, Washington, Wisconsin) were offering more limited choice. In the rest of the states, choice has at least become central in the reform debate. State programs generally do not include private schools, though a number of states (including Arizona and California in the FWL region) are considering that idea.

At the Federal level, President Bush has made choice a plank of his America 2000 platform. He supported the Republican sponsored amendment to S.2, the comprehensive education reform bill, to create demonstration projects providing low-income families with vouchers equal to the tuition charged by either private or public schools of their choice. Recent Senate rejection of the proposal reduces the likelihood that legislation including private-school choice will pass in 1992, though states could use federal funds for public school choice plans.

Models of Public School Choice

No single best choice model exists. Researchers say programs that work best are tailored to the unique needs of a community. The main means of expanding choice is to allow students to select a public school other than their assigned neighborhood one. In **intra-district** programs, this leeway exists only within the home district. Commonly, it takes two forms: *magnet programs*, in which specialty schools with a distinctive curriculum enroll students district-wide while remaining district schools keep designated attendance areas; or *open enrollment plans* that allow each school within a district to draw students district-wide.

Inter-district programs allow students to attend a school outside their home district. At present, Minnesota, Iowa, and Arkansas have the most comprehensive mandated open-enrollment plans; parents may send their children to any school in the state, with minor restrictions. The challenge is to build in transportation costs so that low-income families can participate, to ensure that all families are well enough informed to have real access to alternatives, and to provide a mechanism that takes into account differences among district-level spending.

Factors that Contribute to a Choice Plan's Effectiveness

Joe Nathan, a choice advocate, has identified a number of factors that contribute to a choice plan's effectiveness:

- a clear statement of the goals schools are expected to meet
- information and counseling for parents in selecting programs
- fair and equitable school admission procedures
- resources for all schools to develop distinctive features
- opportunities for teachers and principals to create programs
- transportation for all students within a reasonable area
- requirements that state dollars follow students
- procedures for ensuring racial balance and promoting integration
- oversight and modification of the plan as necessary

Tensions in the Choice Debate

Diversity/ Commonality: Supporters assert that students and teachers will be more satisfied in an educational environment they have chosen. Central to this argument is the belief that the present system no longer works and that students, teachers, and parents would be motivated to excel in a school they have helped design and an educational system flexible enough to allow them to transfer if dissatisfied. Critics, especially of choice plans that include private schools, argue that public schools serve as the common thread for American society, creating opportunities for students from diverse back-

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grounds to come together to learn a common base of knowledge.

Competition/Efficiency: Supporters borrow directly from the concept of a free market system, arguing that competition would erase bureaucratic inertia and improve school efficiency, stimulate creativity, and encourage institutional excellence. Critics say that schools are not like businesses, and the definition of success is much more complicated. Because schools are not equal to begin with, the best will get better and the disadvantaged schools will get worse as funds are spent on "marketing" rather than educational programs for the success of all students.

Access/Equity: Supporters argue that students from economically disadvantaged districts would have equal access to all schools under a choice system. Critics say schools could become more segregated, especially if additional transportation is not readily available. Despite the illusion of fairness, choice could become a sorting process with students at risk further concentrated in schools with other students of low income, or with learning or behavioral problems.

Many researchers have pointed out that choice cannot be viewed as *the* answer to the complex problem of school reform. Choice programs must be linked to other improvement strategies if the goal of restructuring is to be achieved. It is also not a low-cost improvement because the careful construction of choice programs requires investment in other areas such as curriculum, assessment, and staff development. Programs also must offer genuine choices: if the choice is from an array of uniformly mediocre schools, families will feel even more disenfranchised by the public school system.

Choice In the Far West Region

Arizona: Governor Symington's Task Force on Educational Reform has included choice as one of six major components in its reform plan. If passed by the legislature, choice would begin with public schools during 1992/93, but once a set of preconditions were met, sectarian and non-sectarian private schools would be allowed to participate. These preconditions include significant deregulation and decentralization of public schools as well as increased funding. Private schools would be required to meet all state and federal laws applicable to public schools, be approved by the State Board of Education, and have been in operation for at least one year. The legislation will also include provisions regarding admission criteria, special needs students, ethnic balance, transportation, and information dissemination.

California: Though earlier choice bills have failed, legislators are presently considering AB 1614 which would authorize the governing board of any school district to admit students from other districts. Under state guidelines, districts would develop equitable admissions procedures with county boards of education providing choice information to parents. Each district would provide in-district transportation, but students would have to get themselves to the boundary.

Parental Choice in Education Initiative, a voucher initiative, may make it to the November 1992 ballot. This constitutional amendment would allow state money to follow a student to the public or private school of his choice. The state would provide annual scholarships worth at least half the total amount of state and local per student spending. Any private school with more than 20 students could become scholarship-redeeming after meeting certain legal requirements. After one year, any public school could become an independent scholarship-redeeming school. Public schools not choosing to do so would be required to open their remaining capacity to any student regardless of residence. Several legislators plan to introduce constitutional amendments to implement similar voucher plans.

POLICY UPDATE

Far West Laboratory for Educational Research and Development serves the four-state region of Arizona, California, Nevada, and Utah, working with educators at all levels to plan and carry out school improvements. The mission of FWL is to assist educators in the region by linking them with colleagues; sharing information, expertise and innovative practices; and providing technical assistance to build local capacity for continued self-improvement.

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Nevada: Choice is largely confined to the urban areas of Reno and Las Vegas. The population in rural and suburban districts is too sparse to support private schools, and districts have generally honored parental requests to place children outside their areas of residence. In 1991, however, legislators did begin to explore a more systematic approach to parental choice, and further study of the issue continues between legislative sessions.

Utah: The 1990 legislature passed a statewide plan implementing inter-district transfers for districts choosing to participate. The plan did not override existing informal transfer arrangements. At present, few of the state's 40 districts have opted into the new plan for fear it would "open up their borders" and programs to other districts.